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ABSTRACT

A course on detective fiction proved to be very popular at the University of Michigan, Flint. Fifty students signed up for the class, which was supposed to be limited to 45. Surprisingly, though, only 10 of these identified themselves as readers of detective fiction; those remaining were mainly curious. The course featured a range of works beginning with the contemporary, such as Sue Grafton's "'A' Is for Alibi," Robert B. Parker's "Looking for Rachel Wallace," and Peter Weir's film "Witness," and Chester Himes's "Cotton Comes to Harlem," and moved back in time to Dorothy Sayers's "Gaudy Night" and Rex Stout's "Fer-de-Lance." What was it exactly that appealed to students during the semester? They liked the character of Kinsey Millhone for her humanity and the character of Spenser for his toughness and sensitivity. Not surprisingly they were enthusiastic about "Witness." On the other hand, "Cotton Comes to Harlem" was a stumper for them, as was "Gaudy Night"--the British setting was difficult to relate to. The instructor of the course learned several things: (1) that students shared his concerns as an academic reader--the philosophy of the genre was interesting to them once it was embodied in a hero or heroine; (2) that students shared his love of mysteries for their ability to transport them to other times and places; and (3) that they did not always believe the instructor's explorations of the conventions of mysteries to be the most exciting elements of the reading experience. (Contains course syllabus.) (TB)

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ED 382 958

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Why Do Academics Love Mysteries, and Vice-Versa?

A paper presented at the Popular Culture Association/ American Culture Association Meetings, April 12, 1995.

What I had planned to do was to operate on a broad canvas to explore just what it is that makes the mystery so interesting and engrossing a form to academic readers. Then I had planned to turn the question on its head so as to examine how and why academic settings offer so rich (and richly satiric) an opportunity to some detective writers.

Well, things happen. First, my fellow panelists started vacuuming up the wonderful examples of academic mysteries, and I didn't want to repeat their papers. Then, portentously, Judith Kollmann asked me to offer a section of our "topics" course devoted to detective fiction during this current semester. Students reading mysteries in an academic setting, I thought to myself. This might be interesting. And it might be instructive on the subject of academia and mystery. I decided to pay particular attention to how my students responded to their semester-long discovery of the mystery form.

As many of you already know, teaching the mystery in academe is hardly the most onerous task we ever are set. When our Course Schedule appeared, my colleagues' responses to my assignment were positive, even envious:

> "I wish *I* could teach that class!"
> "I wish I could *take* that class!"
> "You English profs have all the luck."

That is to say, academics from a number of disciplines regarded my assignment as if it were a positive command to loll about the house and eat bonbons. They knew what I'd later tell my students, that mysteries are at least in part classy entertainment for smart people. (The philosophical aspects of mystery, its meditations upon the nature of reality and justice, were probably quite far from my colleagues' minds at this point.)

Of course, I didn't just intend to have fun. My interests in the class primarily derived from my interests as a scholar of popular culture, especially of American Popular Culture. I wanted to demonstrate to my students the ways in

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which mysteries model our culture--and the ways in which they suggest cultural change over time and space. It didn't hurt that I also see myself as a tentative mystery writer--nothing so great written so far, but who knows what could happen in a free summer--and so I also intended to build on my examinations of the forms and conventions of detective fiction.

Now, what about my students' responses? First, the class certainly drew. I ended up with fifty students in a sophomore level class ostensibly limited to forty-five. Somewhat surprisingly to me, only ten identified themselves as mystery readers. The other forty were just curious or at best readers/viewers of the works of such writers at the edge of the form as John Grisham. (Here is where my class began to strike me as a possible laboratory for exploring mystery's appeal. On their first paper assignment, exploring themselves as readers of mystery, students made clear that they knew there was something more than "just" entertainment to mystery, that it had an intellectual appeal beyond the soon-dispelled hope of a "gut" course.)

Here is the shape of the course I taught: I generally operated in reverse chronology, moving from contemporary works to those from the past and from American works to British.

We began with:

Sue Grafton's *"A" is for Alibi* (1982)
Robert B. Parker's *Looking for Rachel Wallace* (1980)
Peter Weir's *film, Witness* (1985), and
Chester Himes's *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965)

(My interest in social criticism in detective fiction is seen obviously in these works.)

We then moved further back to:

Rex Stout's *Fer-de-Lance* (1934)
Dorothy Sayers's *Gaudy Night* (1935)

We also dealt with a number of detective short stories, particularly to cover earlier mysteries, moving back through writers such as Chesterton and Futrelle to the tales of Conan Doyle and Poe. By this point the course's concern with social criticism had become less obvious, though perhaps the mystery as work of philosophy had risen in importance.

So, what appealed to the students?

They liked Kinsey Millhone for her humanity--both in a positive sense and as a source of human weakness. (As you'll remember, she goes to sleep when she shouldn't and a character is killed. Several others die--as indeed she

almost does--because of her lapse of professional conduct in sleeping with suspect Charlie Scorsoni.) They hated the recurring descriptions of "Santa Teresa" stucco and the long drives through the western U.S., however much those fit conventions of the hard-boiled form. That is, the non-detective readers hated these things.

They loved Spenser--this class was heavily female, and I do mean loved him--for his toughness, sensitivity and wit. Several compared him to family members--husbands, uncles, whom they loved in spite of and for their quirky traits. They came to like the Lesbian feminist Rachel Wallace for the most part, enjoyed the reading, but said that they didn't like the book as a whole. ("Parker got halfway through before he remembered to start the mystery," said one.) The book's action-packed ending was approved, even including the nurturing of Rachel and the eventual "understanding" between her and Spenser. The students weren't sympathetic to my suggestion that the novel's early presentation of social milieu and development of character relationships over time helped to build toward the eventual reader payoffs at the end. ("For God's sake, Svoboda, there were only two suspects!" said another.) In fact, the students had a point, I think. Parker often relies on his appealing characters and writing skills to carry his books: I read most of his books, but find only about one in three really all that they could be.

Perhaps not surprisingly from the above, the students were enthusiastic about Harrison Ford (and Kelly McGillis) in *Witness*, which we watched over two periods. By this point they could tell that we were stretching the boundaries of "mystery"--the farthest stretch in the semester, I think--with this suspense thriller which moves from Philadelphia to the nearly idyllic Amish Lancaster County, with its aura of early nineteenth century America.

Cotton Comes to Harlem was a stumper to most of them, at least for a while. The language, the violence--and the way in which "justice" is constructed to be so far different from "The Law" was a barrier to them, even after I'd pointed out that questions of justice vs. the law were similarly involved in the previous works which we'd discussed. As you'll remember, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones don't even bat an eye when their police car is stolen. It's all in a day's work. And as the book ends they give a murderous racist a day's head start on "The Law" in order to recoup the $87,000 that eighty-seven Harlem families have lost to a bogus "back to Africa" movement. The mean streets of Harlem were a bit much for many of them, and the novel's satiric elements caused some consternation.

We went on to *Fer-de-Lance*. They liked Archie, they hated Wolfe for the most part due to what they saw as his starchy

pretentiousness. We talked a lot about whether America, 1934, was the same as America, 1995, and seemed to decide that it was more like their America than was Chester Himes's 1965 Harlem. (Strangely, given the demography of UM-Flint, there was only one African-American student in the class, and he wasn't about to chime in to the class discussion on this issue.) When pressed, they admitted that university presidents, financiers and airplane manufacturers were not their usual classmates in downtown Flint. But still, it was more their America than was Harlem.

Then we got to *Gaudy Night*. Juicy characterizations. Lots of thinking about women's place in society and how they might use (or not use) their educations. The irony and ambivalence of Sayers's portrayal of "Shrewsbury College." I knew the setting in British academe might be problematic, so I took some time to give them background on the Oxford University system as opposed to the University of Michigan one. I reminded students that *I* didn't get all the quotations from Brit. Lit. that Harriet, Peter and company bandied about and that they needn't worry if they didn't get them all. We took more than a week and a half--twelve reading days--to *not* read the novel. At most fifteen students got through it on schedule, and this from UM-Flint undergrads, who are generally quite conscientious students. You don't want to hear most of their comments (although students are still dropping by my office to announce with pride, "Well, I finally got through it"). There's no doubt which book the "it" refers to.

What were the problems? Britain, a more foreign land to many Americans that we might be inclined to admit. Harriet, a protagonist whom they saw as clearly linked to Kinsey Millhone in her hard work in order to make it in a man's world--but who offered them no spark or style. The alumni and faculty of Shewsbury, whining ineffectuals almost to a woman, if I was to believe some students' characterizations of them. "Give us heroes or heroines," one said. "We want Lord Peter. We'll even take his nephew, Lord St.-George, but no more of these damned scribbling women!" (Admittedly, that last phrase was a steal from Nathaniel Hawthorne, but the student's sentiment was quite close.)

So what did I learn so far (the course has another week and a half to run)?

First, the students share a number of my concerns as an academic reader. They found the philosophy of mystery interesting once it was embodied in a detective hero or heroine. Questions such as How do we make sense of our world? How do we achieve justice when the law only can approximate it? became absolutely riveting to them when a character like William Brittain's teacher-detrective Mr.

Strang spoke of his passion for justice in the case of a young teacher accused of molesting his student.

Also, they loved the mystery's ability to transport them to other times and places. These places were imbued with additional interest by the struggles between good and evil which the detective and his antagonist embodied. Even so, a little realism went a long way with them. One student, the jury pool supervisor for a local court phrased it this way. "I love mysteries, both traditional and hard-boiled, but they're pure escape for me. I've never seen anything quite like them in my actual court experience."

Where did we diverge? Perhaps not so far. Some students were fans of hard-boiled detectives, others of ratiocinating geniuses like Holmes and Nero Wolfe. Yet all came to appreciate the quest for justice in mysteries of vastly differing appearance. They didn't always find my explorations of the philosophy and conventions of mystery to be the most exciting elements of the class, but when a hard-boiled detective was on the case, or when the game was afoot, they knew I was on to something entrancing and wonderful. One echoed my colleague: "You English professors have all the luck!"

And we do. Thank you.

Appendix: Copy course reading/writing schedule.

English 299--Topics in Literature: Mystery
Winter, 1995
TTh 2:30-3:45 pm in 161 CROB

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Expect some changes from this tentative schedule, particularly as we move later into the semester and decide how much time we wish to spend discussing individual short stories.

Jan. 5 COURSE INTRODUCTION

First Half: Mystery in a More-or-less Contemporary World
Beyond the Detective Story Conventions

Jan. 10 Grafton's "A" is for Alibi (1982) through Chapter 13. Minilecture: cliché & convention.

Jan. 12 Grafton's "A" is for Alibi through Chapter 19.

Jan. 17 Grafton's "A" is for Alibi to end. Minilecture: Traditional & Hardboiled Detective Forms.

Jan. 19 Parker's Looking for Rachel Wallace (1980) through Chapter 14. Minilecture: Traditional & Hardboiled narration.

Jan. 24 Parker's Looking for Rachel Wallace to end. "When is a Mystery not a Mystery??"

Jan. 26 View Peter Weir's Witness (1985) (mystery/thriller) "When is a Mystery not a Mystery??" continued. Discuss Chandler's "The Simple Art of Murder"

Jan. 31 Finish viewing Witness and begin discussion. Minilecture: "John Book as a Version of Chandler's Hero"

Feb. 2 Finish discussing Witness
(First Formal Paper due)
Handout: Knox's Ten Commandments of Mystery
Minilectures: "The Mystery as Social Criticism"; "What We Want vs. What We Get: The Rewards of Formula Fiction"

Feb. 7 Himes's Cotton Comes to Harlem (1965) through Chapter 9. Minilectures: "Police Procedural"; "The Detective in a 'Realized' World"

Feb. 9 Himes's Cotton Comes to Harlem to end. Minilectures: "Where is Justice?" "Chronology of Mystery Fiction"

Feb. 14 Ball's In the Heat of the Night (excerpts) (1965)

Feb. 16
(Second Formal Paper Due--In-Class Essay)

Second Half: Mystery in an Older or More Traditional World

(This schedule for the semester's second half is a little less fixed. If possible we will do another film.)

Feb. 27	Stout's Fer-de-Lance (1934) through chapter 12.
Mar. 2	Stout's Fer-de-Lance through chapter
Mar. 7	Finish discussing Fer-de-Lance
Mar. 9	Stout's "The World Series Murder" Brittain's "Mr. Strang Performs an Experiment" (1967)
Mar. 14	Sayers's Gaudy Night (1935) through chapter 7.
Mar. 16	Sayers's Gaudy Night through chapter 14
Mar. 21	Continue discussing Gaudy Night.
Mar. 23	Finish discussing Gaudy Night. Sayers's "The Adventurous Exploit of the Cave of Ali Baba"
Mar. 28	Christie's "The Mystery of Hunter's Lodge" (1924)
Mar. 30	Christie's "Village Murders" (1939?)
Apr. 4	Rinehart's "Locked Doors" (1932) Third Formal Paper Due.
Apr. 6	Futrelle's "The Problem of Cell 13" (1905) Chesterton's "The Invisible Man" (1910)
Apr. 11	Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes Excerpts from A Study in Scarlet (1887), "The Final Problem" "The Adventure of the Empty House"
Apr. 13	No Class: Svoboda at Conference
Apr. 18	Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" & "The Purloined Letter"